

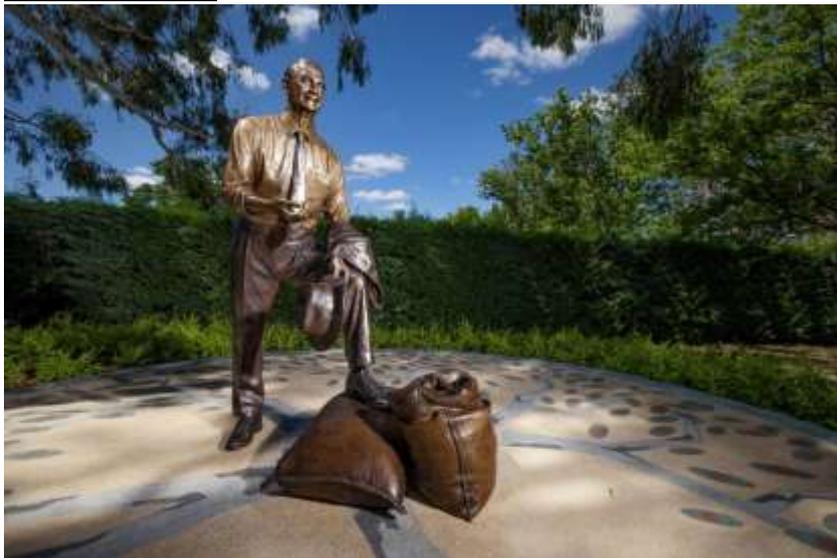
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Another bronze ghost: What John McEwen's statue says about Australia



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Federal Politics



The new sculpture of long-serving Country Party leader John McEwen. Picture: Sithixay Dittavong

On Queen Victoria Terrace, in a quiet pocket of Canberra's parliamentary zone, passersby stop to gaze at Australia's 18th prime minister as he stands over two bags of wheat.

The sculpture of long-serving Country Party leader Sir John McEwen is cast bronze, portraying the politician nicknamed "Black Jack" with a broad smile and holding out a handful of grain.

When Governor-General David Hurley unveiled Canberra's newest statue of an Australian prime minister on December 11, National Party members clapped and murmured their appreciation.

Created under contract by sculptor Lis Johnson, the 2.1-metre piece depicts the party luminary in baggy trousers, rolled up sleeves and tie. His jovial look is perhaps a surprise, given the grim persona of

McEwen, who served as prime minister for 23 days after the disappearance of Harold Holt.

McEwen stands at the centre of a new mosaic celebrating 100 years of the National Party, formerly the Country Party.

The \$500,000 commemorative project has raised questions and started debate, but, at first glance, it may not be obvious why. The parliamentary zone is one of Australia's symbolic spaces, representing the history, democracy, culture, people and identity of the nation.



Governor-General David Hurley unveils the sculpture of John McEwen in December. Picture: Sitthixay Ditthavong

Critics of the project to add a bronze McEwen to the space argue Australia needs to think harder and deeper about how it represents itself and its history.

Historians and journalists have urged greater commemoration for Australians in all their diversity, and better recognition of Indigenous and women leaders in the parliamentary zone.

They have also called for decisions about statues and memorials in the space to involve more consultation with the community.

Was 'Black Jack' all that?

McEwen, Australia's third-shortest serving prime minister, joins four of the nation's most significant holders of that office portrayed in statues around Canberra: John Curtin, Ben Chifley, Robert Menzies and Edmund Barton.

Why has a caretaker prime minister joined such company?

In making the case for McEwen, the Nationals pointed to his influence as Country Party leader and deputy prime minister for nearly 13 years from 1958.

Nationals members say the sculpture honours both McEwen's and the party's contributions to the nation, and gives due recognition to regional and rural Australia.

Among fierce defenders of the statue is Nationals senator Bridget McKenzie, who became McEwen's biographer last year.

Speaking after the statue's unveiling, Senator McKenzie said the National Party had waited 100 years to be recognised with a commemorative sculpture in the capital.



Statues of Labor prime ministers John Curtin and Ben Chifley in the parliamentary zone. Picture: Karleen Minney

"We are older than the Liberal party. And our nation was really built on the back of the resilience of rural and regional Australians. We

don't say our nation was built on the sheep's back for nothing," she said.

"So in our national capital, it's only right and just and appropriate that we reflect our contribution as country people and regional industries, but also [what] their political representatives for the last 100 years have given to this place in both Old and New Parliament House."

Nationals leader and deputy prime minister Michael McCormack, speaking at the unveiling, said the McEwen statue was not only for the party.

"It is an appropriate monument for future generations so they may gaze upon it and know who he was and what a difference he made, so their lives are better off."

So who was McEwen, and what difference did he make?

To answer the second question, there is consensus that McEwen was highly influential in post-war Australia. Paul Keating once said he ranked as the most significant post-war conservative, while John Howard described McEwen as the most significant person in the Menzies era, other than Menzies himself - high praise from a devotee of the Liberal party giant.

McEwen, a Victorian MP, is considered an architect of the trade and commerce treaty with Japan that paved the way for an expansion of Australia's trading relationship with the nation. In government he advocated Australia having a closer relationship with Asia.

Political journalist Laurie Oakes said McEwen was one of the few people he had met in 50 years of journalism who deserved the description "great". Journalist and political historian Paul Kelly said in 1986: "The economic structures created by post World War II government were carved by McEwen."

There are different stories about how McEwen gained the "Black Jack" nickname. One version is that Menzies bestowed the moniker on him partly for his grim demeanour.

Getting to know McEwen might require looking beyond his "Black Jack" persona. The Nationals say the sculpture achieves this, starting with its wide smile.



The statue of Australia's longest serving prime minister, Robert Menzies, in Canberra. Picture: Karleen Minney

After its unveiling, Nationals centenary chair Kay Hull said it showed the true McEwen: "He was a visionary, he was a person that actually was a very happy person. He had a sense of openness, so the open hand with the grain also demonstrates generosity and care for other people."

Australian National University historian Bruce Scates said history was not always well served by commemorative sculptures and the McEwen memorial was a case in point.

"A formidable (some would say) ruthless political persona gazes benignly across Canberra; this is not the 'Black Jack' feared by many," he said.

The bulging bags of wheat - a symbol of the nation's bounty - and McEwen's open hand offering grain aligned the sculpture with an older tradition of commemoration.

"Across the ages, powerful politicians have presented themselves as public benefactors, distributing the largesse of the land," Professor Scates said.

"The statue is intended to symbolise McEwen's contribution to primary industry and negotiating Australia's trade agreements abroad and no doubt these are important dimensions to his political legacy. But history looks beyond such simplistic caricatures."

McEwen was a complex individual whose legacy might be better explored in an exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy rather than in a celebratory statue, Professor Scates said.

"History, as a discipline, involves critical and challenging reflection on the past. This statue embodies an unthinking nostalgia for the values of the Menzies era," he said.

"It seems strangely out of place in the world we live in today."

The people's place?

The McEwen statue has also raised questions about the way decisions are made about commemorative art in the parliamentary zone.

More than 18 months ago, the Nationals' centenary committee decided to ask the party's members and federal council to choose between McEwen and two other briefly-serving Country Party prime ministers - Sir Earle Page and Sir Arthur Fadden - for commemoration.

They chose McEwen, and in July 2019, the Nationals proposed that a sculpture of the former prime minister be considered to mark the centenary of the party.

The Senate gave approval to the works in February 2020. In March, the House of Representatives approved the proposed design and site for the commemorative sculpture and mosaic. The National Capital Authority managing the parliamentary zone also gave approval to the works in August.

For every Black Jack McEwen statue that's thrown up now, there needs to be at least a dozen women, Indigenous Australians, people from multicultural heritage, to reflect what Australia is really like.

Associate professor Chris Wallace

Professor Scates said the McEwen statue was a case of commemoration crafted from above, an exercise privileging the voice of powerful political elites. He called for closer consultation with communities on the forms tributes might take.

The statue contradicted Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin's vision for the parliamentary zone as the people's place, enlivened by a rich civic culture, not as the preserve of particular political elites, Professor Scates said.

While Canberra's other statues of former prime ministers appeared as statesmen who devoted their lives to public service, rather than party entities, the McEwen memorial celebrated him first and foremost as a National party figure and emblematic of the Nationals' resilience and values, he said.

"When one bears in mind that the leading advocates of this memorial were today's leaders of the Nationals, this seems more a partisan political statement than the celebration of civic virtues that the Griffin and Mahony design for Canberra enshrined," Professor Scates said.

Historian and University of Sydney professor Mark McKenna warned against a statue fetish, where political parties jockeyed for their own luminaries to be memorialised in stone or bronze.

"We don't want to turn the parliamentary triangle into a collection of bronze ghosts strolling around. You'll end up with more statues in the triangle than you've got politicians in Parliament House, if you follow it through to its logical conclusion."

Getting in the zone

In all the debate about the statue, McEwen's contributions and qualities are not in question.

The discussion about the sculpture is instead focused mainly on the need to give a better, more accurate representation of Australia and its history in the parliamentary zone.

Asked about the debate, historian and associate professor at the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation at the University of Canberra, Chris Wallace, said statues should reflect Australia in its diversity.

"I love public art, I'm all for more statues of significant Australians in the parliamentary triangle and elsewhere," she said.

"For every 'Black Jack' McEwen statue that's thrown up now, there needs to be at least a dozen women, Indigenous Australians, people from multicultural heritage, to reflect what Australia is really like.

"It's really disappointing that this isn't being addressed. Because it's about 'if you can see it, you can be it'. And the idea that only bronzes of dead white men are being installed, that continues to bend the reality and bend future outcomes."

Asked whether the parliamentary zone reflected Australia and its history, Senator McKenzie said this after the statue unveiling: "Our national capital should be a place for everybody, absolutely.

"It's taken our party 100 years to get a statue, so these things do take time, and you've got to understand all that process.

"But absolutely our nation's capital should be a place where all of Australia, in all our diversity, conservatives [or] not, can actually feel that they've been able to make a contribution to building our nation, which they have.

"I would hate to think that only one side of politics or one particular sub-group or sub-culture in our society is seen as worthy of holding space here, because it should be a space for everyone."

Professor McKenna said visitors to the parliamentary zone would encounter many glaring absences, the largest being the lack of a significant state-sanctioned institutional Indigenous presence.

The absence was, in a way, consistent with the absence of recognition for First Nations peoples from the constitution, he said. "We need not only a voice enshrined in the constitution, we need a visible voice and presence in the parliamentary triangle, and we need to think about memorialising not only the frontier wars, but

also all of those Indigenous people whose remains were taken from Country and still are yet to be returned.

"We need to showcase the incredible depth and diversity of Indigenous cultures in this country. We've got to really think about how we can do those things and that to me is a thousand times more important than providing yet another roost for the pigeons in providing a statue of McEwen."

A recent parliamentary inquiry report recommended moving the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies from the Acton peninsula to the parliamentary zone, and expanding its facilities into a comprehensive national institution focused on the history, culture and heritage of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This would include a national resting place for repatriated ancestral remains that cannot immediately return to Country.

The lack of commemoration acknowledging Indigenous history and peoples in the parliamentary zone reflected much about the nation, Professor McKenna said.

"It's an accurate reflection of the fact that we have not yet found a way to include Indigenous Australians in our image of the nation and our vision of the nation, we have not found a way to do it.

"In a sense, the parliamentary triangle and that absence reflects the fact that the land was taken without treaty, compensation or consent. That's the big absence, and it's there, and speaks very loudly.

"And we have to turn that around, we have to show that it's not good enough, that we don't accept any more that that is who we want to be."

Professor McKenna questioned whether Australia needed to spend \$500,000 on a McEwen statue now, when it was recovering from the pandemic and while other institutions needed more funding.

"I just don't see it as an urgent or pressing issue. The bigger things, about the glaring absences, are far more important.

"Aboriginal people have been waiting for centuries. McEwen can wait a bit longer."